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AUTHOR Frager, Alan M.; Thompson, Loren
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ABSTRACT

When readers encounter the dissonance of conflicting ideas and are motivated by the psychological discomfort to resolve the dissonance, the effort to alleviate this discomfort may well result in the activation of those cognitive processes termed critical reading and thinking. With this in mind, one approach to teaching critical reading treats reading as a meaning-driven, hypothesis-generating process that involves interactions between the thoughts of readers and authors. The general teaching pattern of the approach is to (1) have students read conflicting accounts of a person, event, or situation; (2) increase cognitive dissonance by eliciting from students explanations and arguments supporting each side of the conflict; (3) demonstrate or model critical reading of the same accounts; and (4) extend the lesson to a point where dissonance is resolved through further reading (of additional accounts) and through the guided application of those critical reading and thinking skills previously modeled. Evaluation of student learning should focus students' ability to apply critical reading and thinking skills in their encounters with additional accounts on the subject. For example, a test would assess students' ability to discuss the merits of a third author's views in respect to how well those views resolve the conflicting perspectives of a first and second author. (The paper includes a sample critical reading lesson and examples of conflicting accounts from nontestbook sources.) (HOD)

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Conflict: The Key to Critical Reading Instruction

Dr. Alan M. Frager
Heidelberg College

Dr. Loren Thompson
University of Houston- Downtown

Return address:

Dr. Alan M. Frager
Education Department
Heidelberg College
310 East Market Street
Tiffin, Ohio 44883

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Conflict: The Key to Critical Reading Instruction

Consider the critical reading behavior of Joe Fan, football enthusiast, as he opens his Monday morning paper's sports page to read about his team's third straight loss. The question he wants answered, the same question asked by thousands of other fans as well as the team's management, is: Who's to blame? It is a critical question each of the newspaper's sportswriters have attempted to answer, but the answers vary. Joe's attention is first caught by the largest headline; "COACH TO BLAME" it says and Joe learns by reading on that the coach's game plan was too predictable.

Finishing that story, Joe's eyes come to rest briefly on the familiar picture in the by-line of a respected sports editor who has analyzed the game in terms of the quarterback's mistakes. As Joe reads the column, he is intrigued by the alternate explanation of the team's woes. The deft writing and sage observations of this "dean" of sportswriters nearly convinces Joe the quarterback is a bum until, flipping through several pages to locate the column's conclusion, his attention is diverted by a spread of "key play" photographs taken during the game. These lead him to read the play-by-play recap and statistical summary below the pictures. While carefully analyzing these facts to find evidence which might substantiate either of the two contradictory views on who is to blame, Joe reaches the conclusion that neither write-up has sufficiently taken into account the poor performance of the team's defensive squad. He further concludes that although each of the accounts have accurately reported some elements partially responsible for the loss, neither in fact fingers the central problem. Laying his paper aside, Joe now feels confident that he possesses enough insight to intelligently discuss the game with anyone who asks his opinion.

Conflict: The Key

If only reading and content area teachers were able to motivate such a high degree of active and critical student involvement with printed materials as that exhibited by Joe Fan during the course of his Monday morning reading. Our purpose in this paper is to suggest and illustrate how such a worthy goal may be obtained.

Let's begin with an examination of the critical reading aspects of Joe Fan's encounter with print. First, he begins to read with a clearly established critical purpose--to affix blame for his favorite team's latest defeat. The successful accomplishment of this goal will demand nothing less than careful, ongoing evaluation of the information encountered. While immersed in the cognitive interaction with the ideas presented in the two articles, Joe must also (1) contrast the ideas in the second article (sport's editors') with those presented in the first article, and (2) consider the different author's (authorities') competence. Turning next to a more objective account of the game, the play-by-play and statistical summaries, Joe's reading behavior suggests a distinct attempt to distinguish fact from opinion. Finally, Joe synthesizes the information he has been able to collect through reading, draws an independent conclusion based on his reading, makes judgments about his previous reading, and awaits an opportunity to discuss (to test) his critically-acquired views on the topic.

Is it surprising that Joe Fan's reading behavior displays so many higher order cognitive skills? Perhaps, because the sports page is generally considered to be as deep as the sports fan is bright, which incidentally raises a more interesting question: How did Joe, assuming he is an average guy, become a critical reader? One explanation, with significant implications for teachers, is that Joe's critical reading behavior was probably not "learned"--as from completing numerous commercially-prepared practice critical

reading exercises or from frequent reading of the sports page--but rather elicited from a unique element present in both the reader and the text and in the interaction of the two. This catalytic element is conflict.

Conflict and Cognitive Dissonance

To understand how conflict can activate critical reading behaviors, one must reflect on a phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance, described by Festinger (1957) as "a psychological discomfort (which occurs) in the presence of an inconsistency." Dissonance, commonly defined as disharmony or lack of congruity, is a term highly descriptive of feelings generated by conflicting sources-- sounds, sights, tastes, and so on. While several types of dissonance affect people, such as hunger, noise, and chemical disequilibrium, the operative type for critical reading is termed "cognitive" dissonance--psychological discomfort caused by conflicting ideas. The link from cognitive dissonance to critical reading is clarified by realizing that, as Festinger explains, "the existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance." That is, when readers encounter the dissonance of conflicting ideas and are motivated by the psychological discomfort to resolve the dissonance, the effort to alleviate this discomfort may well result in the activation of cognitive processes or behaviors which we term critical reading and thinking.

Consider, once more, Joe Fan. First, we'll assume the harsh reality of his team's defeat, conflicting with Joe's high hope and expectations, produced the state of cognitive dissonance which led him to read the sports page Monday morning. Next, during the course of his reading, Joe encounters conflicting

explanations for the defeat which fuel rather than extinguish the dissonance. In his effort to relieve the intensified state of internal conflict, Joe goes so far as to consider authors' competence, compare sources of information, distinguish fact from opinion, and finally to produce judgments about the authors and information. As a result, Joe's feeling of dissonance is reduced and replaced with a feeling of consonance.

Though Joe Fan's encounter with the sports page provides a clear illustration of how common, everyday events may spark critical reading behavior, there are countless other examples where the use of a conflict format is deliberately employed to elicit similar reactions. Television programs using the format include This Week with David Brinkley, Donahue, and Crossfire. Print media such as newspapers like USA Today (opinion page), magazines like Congressional Digest, and books like On the Contrary (Rainbolt and Fleetwood, 1984) likewise emphasize conflict to stimulate critical involvement. Political campaigns, courtroom trials, and consumer-targeted product advertisements provide evidence of its widespread existence throughout society at large. Oddly enough, it would seem that in our schools -- the one place where critical thinking is so strongly espoused and expected -- there appears to be little, if any, use of conflict to generate cognitive dissonance and critical thinking.

Teaching critical reading

The approach to teaching critical reading described here is basically inductive, proceeding from specifics and leading to generalizations. Also reflecting a psycholinguistic orientation, the approach treats reading as a meaning-driven, hypothesis-generating process which involves interactions between the thoughts of the readers and authors. The general teaching pattern

of the approach is to: (1) have students read conflicting accounts of a person, event, or situation; (2) increase cognitive dissonance by eliciting from students explanations and arguments supporting each side of the conflict; (3) demonstrate or model critical reading of the same accounts; and (4) extend the lesson to a point where dissonance is resolved through further reading (of additional accounts) and the guided application of those critical reading and thinking skills previously modeled.

A teacher's first step in using this approach is the most important for success--finding reading selections which present conflicting accounts of a person, event, or situation. The concerned teacher must be constantly on the lookout for such readings as they are seldom found in commercial classroom texts, but often appear randomly in outside source material such as popular periodicals or books. Videotaped excerpts of television broadcasts such as the news report or commentaries are also excellent when contrasted with print materials. Finding suitable materials depends heavily on how purposefully they are sought and teachers' insight in recognizing them. Here, for example, are three sets of conflicting accounts from some recent non-textbook sources:

1. Content Area: Music Topic: Michael Jackson

   Account A: In "Michael Jackson: Junk Culture Triumph" (Working Woman, 1984) Jackson is described as a "rather frail, androgynous creature with a light, genderless voice. . ." It is reported that "he acts childlike but obviously is a shrewd show-business entrepreneur" and that "it is rumored he had his face remodeled to resemble Diana Ross, one of his mentors."

Account B: Ebony (1984) describes Jackson as "mystical offstage as he is magical onstage" and as "shy, sensitive, and celibate." The article stresses that Jackson is "pious without pontificating" and that his music making is motivated by selfless, inner needs.

2. Content Area: Health Topic: Passive Smoke

Account A: According to an advertisement paid for by the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company (1984), there is "nothing that proves scientifically that cigarette smoke causes disease in non-smokers." The ad explains that it would take non-smokers four days to inhale the equivalent of one cigarette from the passive smoke in public places and concludes "our own concerns about health can take an unproven claim and magnify out of all proportion."

Account B: The Cleveland Plain Dealer (1984) newspaper reports the results of a Japanese study which found "a non-smoker whose family members puff more than two packs a day actually inhales the equivalent of one or two cigarettes." Research recommendations are reported to include the warning that "smoking should be restricted in such public places as hospitals, restaurants, meeting rooms, vehicles, and even on sidewalks."

3. Content Area: Social Studies Topic: Watergate

Account A: In a newspaper column, Maurice Stans (USA Today, 1984) compares Watergate to a witchhunt, causing "wanton

injuries on innocent people whose only offense was being a friend or associate of Richard Nixon."

Account B: In a newspaper column Sam Ervin, Jr. (USA Today,1984) likens Watergate to an attempt to "rob the American people of the freedom to nominate and elect a candidate for President." Ervin explains that agents of the President "paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to hide the truth."

Many other examples can be found in the reporting of history, an endeavor rampant with subjectivity which is so fascinating in close scrutiny. For instance, a comparison of selected passages from the memoirs of Elizabeth Custer, wife of General George Armstrong Custer, with selected passages from Indian accounts of Custer reveals the General to be both sensitive and brutal, kind and cruel, modest and vainglorious (Thompson and Frager, 1984). Or consider these two conflicting accounts of the American Revolution:

4. Account A: Encyclopedia International (1975) describes the American Revolution as a fight for self-government which began as a skirmish between British regulars and New England minutemen and succeeded because George Washington was made Commander of American militiamen. The Constitution is described as a document which gave "the national government power to tax and regulate trade" and to establish the executive, judicial, and legislative government branches.

   Account B: The Great Soviet Encyclopedia (1980) describes the American Revolution as a "national-liberation, national

> unification, and anti-feudal movement," in which the "popular masses played a decisive role." The Constitution is viewed as a means for centralizing authority to "put an end to attempts to further the Revolution."

While locating conflicting accounts in outside sources for critical reading lessons requires more teacher effort and time than using canned reading exercises from workbooks, the return on the investment is high. Use of articles from newspapers, magazine, and trade books give teachers more control in matching reading selections with students' interests, reading abilities, and desire for current and topical information.

After acquiring and duplicating conflicting accounts on a subject, teachers can structure critical reading lessons in two different ways. One is to distribute accounts describing one point of view to half of the class to read and accounts describing an opposite point of view to the other half. An advantage of this method becomes apparent when the teacher elicits information on the subject and the conflicting responses of students heightens their interest and involvement, creating a critical purpose for reading the other account.

Another way to begin the lesson is to give all students both conflicting accounts and set the purpose for reading to reach a tentative conclusion about which account is closer to the "truth." With this strategy the teacher proceeds to elicit from students strong arguments and clear explanations of the merits of both accounts.

Whether students are given one account first and then the other or both accounts at the same time, one objective in discussing the accounts after

students have read them both is to elicit from the students all the facts and inferences which define the divergent perspectives in the accounts. This is probably best accomplished through questioning students and modeling for them the critical thinking skills which they may not have applied to the accounts. For example, a teacher could have insights into an author's bias, purpose, or competence which students might lack. Or a teacher could detect in an account the use of propaganda devices--such as appeals to emotions, distortions, omissions, and faulty logic--and point these out to the students.

A second objective following the reading is to create additional cognitive dissonance, more tension which motivates students to want to read and inquire further to resolve the conflict on the subject. To this end it is important for the teacher to conceal any preference for the perspective offered in either account. By directing student attention to the specific points presented in each account and promoting their analysis of the generalizations drawn from those points, a teacher can help clarify the assumptions, motives, and differences which color the perspectives of each account. When both accounts are thus "laid bare" and students can recognize that even the most confidently stated views may rest on tenuous propositions, the teacher then exploits the cognitive dissonance created by guiding students to generate hypotheses about ways the conflict may be resolved and helping them locate additional reading sources which could confirm their hypotheses. A critical reading lesson based on this strategy may be extended as long as student interest is maintained and additional sources can be found which shed light on the subject.

Evaluation of student learning should focus students' ability to apply critical reading and thinking skills in their encounters with additional

accounts on the subject. For example, a test would assess students' ability to discuss the merits of a third author's views in respect to how well those views resolve the conflicting perspectives of a first and second author.

A Lesson to Try

This critical reading lesson, which would be appropriate for reading, social studies or English classes of high school students, uses two reading selections which are accessible from most public libraries. One selection must contain a generic discussion of the Japanese people, such as the one contained in the World Book Encyclopedia (1982) below:

> Today, the people of Japan are a mixture of Mongol and Malay. Most Japanese have yellowish skin, dark eyes, prominent cheekbones, and straight black hair. Their eyes seem slanted because the inner edge of their upper eyelids has a fold. Most Japanese are short and stocky, and their legs are short in proportion to their bodies.

The other selection must be a particular article from Time magazine (1941), entitled, "How to Tell your Friends from the Japs". This article, which may have to be reproduced from microfilm, is structured as a comparison between the Chinese ("our friends") and the Japanese (World War II enemies), informing readers that:

> "Some Chinese are tall (average: 5 ft. 5 in.). Virtually all Japanese are short (average: 5 ft. 2 1/2 in.). Japanese are likely to be stockier and broader-hipped than short Chinese. Japanese -

except for wrestlers - are seldom fat; they often dry up and grow lean as they age. Those who know them best often rely on facial expression to tell them apart: the Chinese expression is likely to be more placid, kindly, open; the Japanese more positive, dogmatic, arrogant. Japanese are hesitant, nervous in conversation, laugh loudly at the wrong time. Japanese walk stiffly erect, hard-heeled. Chinese, more relaxed, have an easy gait, some-times shuffle."

After acquiring and duplicating these two accounts and perhaps eliciting a few comments from students on their conceptions of what Japanese people are like, ask the students to read from the accounts to get a clearer description of Japanese people. Next, elicit from students descriptive terms used in each account to describe the Japanese and make a list of these on the board or a transparency. Increase the cognitive dissonance which the two accounts can create by highlighting obvious contradictions, like whether <u>all</u> Japanese are short, and subtle ones, like whether Japanese facial features actually reveal "dogmatic, arrogant" expressions. While eliciting these descriptions, be certain to take a neutral stance in order to encourage students to vigorously defend the statements from both accounts. When most of the possible descriptive terms for the Japanese have been elicited from and discussed by the students, ask them to consider whether the following considerations, which "occurred to you while reading" these accounts, would affect their understanding of the descriptions of the Japanese: the accounts were written at different times; the authors had different purposes for writing; the

accounts, to different degrees, lump together members of group and associate them with particular traits -- i.e., stereotype the Japanese people. Using these three considerations as discussion foci, lead students to examine the descriptions elicited and have them suggest sources for more and more valid information about the Japanese people.

At this point, extension of the lesson can follow different paths for different classes. Students in reading classes can bring in and discuss information from a wide variety of sources, written at different readability levels, with the purpose of creating sufficient background knowledge for reading some Katherine Paterson novels like The Master Puppeteer (1975), Of Nightingales that Weep (1974), and The Sign of the Chrysanthemum (1973). A social studies teacher might be more directive in helping students locate additional information about the Japanese people, guiding them to accounts describing economic, social, historical, and religious aspects of the Japanese and teaching them the social scientist's approaches to studying a people. An English teacher might go further with the stereotyping aspects of the two accounts, leading up to a unit on sex-role stereotypes in Hemingway's short stories.

Conclusion and cautions

The approach to teaching critical reading described above is not new; it has been alternately called teaching through problematic situations (Dewey, 1933), using controversy in the classroom (Lunstrum, 1981), and teaching dialectical thinking (Paul, 1984). Its reliance on sources which generate cognitive dissonance is supported theoretically by the work of Festinger (1957) and studies of cognitive development by Turiel (1977) and Rodgers (1984).

Yet, teachers planning critical reading instruction need to be aware of some caveats regarding cognitive dissonance and critical thinking. First, the presentation and in-depth examination of divergent viewpoints on a topic tends to promote a relativistic mode of thought, which treats knowledge as qualitative, dependent on contexts, and equally accessible to the students as to the teacher. This mode is quite different from the way most students and their parents probably view knowledge, which is that it is quantitative, independent of contexts, and possessed in superior quantities by teachers, so that students may learn much but never know as much as their teacher. Tension may be felt and expressed by students who would prefer traditional teaching methods for which the teachers' role is to know and "cover" a body of knowledge and the students' role is to work hard, read every word, and learn "right answers." Parents also may express tension and displeasure if their children transfer relativistic thought processes beyond school subjects and begin questioning their parents' authority and values.

Second, teachers should recognize that while their own critical reading and thinking abilities may have developed to a sophisticated level through their university studies and professional experiences, they may not be aware of what skills these actually are or when they use them. For example, a teacher may "critically" read an article in a professional reading journal and conclude that the author's ideas aren't practical; yet, that same teacher could be entirely unaware of some critical reading skills he or she may have used--such as considering the author's competence to write about classroom practice, testing the author's assumptions about the reading process, and weighing the validity of the research cited to support conclusions. For this reason and

also because critical thinking is an area of study with a technical vocabulary and a range wide enough to encompass the varied domains of logic, philosophy of education, and cognitive and developmental psychology, we encourage teachers to seek opportunities to expand their knowledge about critical reading and thinking. One way is to attend one of the growing number of critical thinking conferences. Another is to establish a professional working relationship with a college or university critical thinking instructor, who can usually be found in a philosophy department. A third way is to continue to read articles on this topic in professional journals.

A final caution is just to consider what the failure to teach critical reading and thinking may lead to. In a society where the amount of information doubles every eight years; where increased mobility and communication provides an ever-expanding array of life style choices; where the power to defend the country, to steer the economy, and to provide justice is determined in elections by the votes of free citizens, our individual potential to make informed, reasoned decisions to guide our own and society's fate has never been greater. Yet, the potential also exists for us to "drown" in an information overload, to transform ourselves quickly and frequently but without purpose or direction, to fail to discern the difference in our political choices and so abdicate our decision-making authority. What, if not critical reading and thinking, can better help us realize the potential to shape our lives and society for our own good?

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